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ABSTRACT

Although writing today generally is perceived as process, college English departments are still deeply rooted in the concept of writing as product. Hiring depends upon product in terms of letters of inquiry, vitae, and credentials; retention, promotion, and merit raises rest on product in the form of publications, grants, awards, and teacher evaluations. Against such a background, it is no surprise that process has had an uphill fight in the administration of English departments. In upper level courses or institutions where departments are small enough that quantitative measures are not necessary or where admissions standards or section sizes or teaching loads make highly individualized classes possible, writing as process has been readily accepted. Far more problematic are the larger institutions, where admissions standards are minimal if they exist at all, and where the number of sections and the staff to teach them are so large that they demand specialized administration to ensure relative uniformity. Departments are confronted with the dilemma of teaching writing versus testing it; teaching the process, but needing to ensure the product. However, textbooks are slowly incorporating the process of writing, graduate schools are emphasizing it in their courses, and freshmen programs are being staffed by more informed teachers who in turn influence the programs themselves. (HOD)

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PROCESS, PRODUCT, AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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PROCESS, PRODUCT, AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Twenty years ago, D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wiecke published their Pre-writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State Univ., 1964), in which they asserted that writing is best described as a process. Today, the word process is so closely associated with the teaching of writing that product, its opposite, verges on becoming a dirty word. Yet application always lags behind theory, creating what Sara Lundsteen has called the "knowledge gap" (Help for the Teacher of Written Composition, Urbana, Ill.: Clearing House on Reading and Communication, 1976, p. 1). Books and articles propound process, but many teachers still stress product. Or do they? Just what is the impact of writing as a process? A look at process and product within the context of the English department will suggest that Lundsteen's "knowledge gap" is not as wide as claimed and will raise some larger issues about the future of English departments.

If product has a deeply rooted if not long-standing tradition in the teaching of writing, think of how well entrenched the word is in administration. Hiring depends upon product in terms of one's letter of inquiry, vita, and credentials: retention, promotion, and merit raises rest on product in the form of publications, grants, awards, and teacher evaluations. Grade distributions, letters of complaint or congratulation, letters of recommendation, all are products--tangible, measurable indices of one's worth. In fact, the

relationship between product and person is so close in administration that occasionally the two merge. Deans and presidents, for instance, often refer to the goal of graduating more knowledgeable and informed students: "What can we do," they ask, "to produce a better product?"

Against such a background, it is no surprise that process has had an up-hill fight in the administration of English Departments.

In upper level courses or institutions, where departments are small enough so that quantitative measures are not necessary or where admissions standards or section sizes or teaching loads make highly individualized classes possible, writing as a process has been readily accepted. One need only think of Richard Gebhardt's Writing as a Liberating Activity Newsletter, a publication that is built on process. Another version of writing as a process underpins A. D. VanNostrand's functional writing at Brown University and Donald Murray's one-to-one conferences at the University of New Hampshire. But look again at these people and places. Findlay College has a faculty-student ratio of 15 to 1 and students with ACT scores of 18 and above: Brown University is rated by Peterson's Guide as among the most difficult universities to get in to: and the University of New Hampshire has a faculty-student ratio of 16 to 1 as well as students with SAT scores in the 500's. At institutions like these, one need not worry so much about product.

Far more problematic are the larger institutions, where admission standards are minimal if they exist at all, and where the number of sections and the staff to teach them are so large

that they demand specialized administration--a freshman composition director or chair--to insure relative uniformity. These are some of the two year colleges-where public institutions outnumber private two to one: these are some of the doctoral-granting and comprehensive universities where again state universities outnumber private: these are a significant number of the public colleges and universities, two and four-year, that enroll 78% of the nation's undergraduates (Yearbook of Higher Education, [illegible]-84, p. 659). These are the institutions where one does need to worry about product, where writing as a process has been slow to take hold, where now process and product attempt a delicate balance. To analyze this balance more closely, it is necessary to examine what's on the scale, to look at texts, teachers, and goals and to place them in a wider context: the general climate of the department, university, and culture. As one would expect with language, the written word is the most resistant to change, and that is what today's freshman textbooks reveal. Their natural home is the large composition program, where the assumption that same text means same course leads to mass adoption. In Louisiana, for example, every public university requires both a handbook and a reader for each of its many freshman English courses (Elizabeth Penfield, "A Survey of Freshman Composition in Louisiana," Louisiana English Journal, scheduled for publication, Spring, 1984). Often, the choice is limited to one text.

To find a text that pleases some 34 teachers of English 101 is impossible; to find one that does not offend is easy. Notice I have emphasized teachers. Many times they unwittingly put their own needs before their students'. Every time we consider new texts at the University of New Orleans, some books are rejected because a few instructors find the essays "boring" or "not challenging enough," though the topics may interest the students even if the theses elude them. A handbook may be discarded because an instructor points out "it only has four pages on the comma": for most students one would suffice. The texts that are chosen are those that have become familiar. Harbrace is now in its ninth edition, and its clones are too numerous to count. The familiar does not offend.

But the familiar is apt to be the traditional, and the traditional is apt to be product-oriented. Writing in 1978, Donald Stewart found that only 21% of the popular composition books he examined reflected "any appreciable awareness" of contemporary theorists and 79% "were strictly current-traditional" ("Composition Textbooks and the Assault on Tradition," CCC, 29 [1978], 174). More recently, Clinton Burhans' analysis of texts published in 1982-83 shows only 26% "reflect any influence of the emerging knowledge" ("The Teaching of Writing and the Knowledge Gap," CE, 45 [1983],652). The number may be even smaller than that. The list Burhans uses relies on publishers' "annotations" though the "notes have been edited [by the list's compiler, Barbara Weaver] to present information objectively" ("Bibliography of Writing Textbooks," Writing Program Administration, 6 [Fall-Winter, 1982], 25). And

publishers know that process is in--whether it is embedded in the texts or merely a surface feature is another question.

In the hands of an inexperienced teacher or one who is merely going though the motions, the textbook can become the course, particularly if the writing program has a required syllabus. Stephen Witte's monumental National Survey of College and University Writing Program Directors (ED 210 709) shows that 65% of the programs use a formal syllabus for their first semester composition course and 39% require that it be followed (p.41). Given this contraint, handbooks can become invitations to drill, rhetorics can invite lectures on stylistics, and readings can become an introduction to the humanities. A skilled and knowledgeable teacher, however, can use the most product-oriented books and syllabi to support a process-oriented course in which the primary focus is the student's text, the paper that is evolving. Then, handbooks and rhetorics become tools, much like the dictionary, and readings become, as Paul Escholz claims, "prose models that an individual student might find helpful in dealing with his or her particular writing problem" (Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland, eds. Eight Approaches to Composition [Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1980], p.30). Escholz' "Prose Models Approach" is a far cry from Decker, taken straight. How a text is used therefore is a better index to the focus of a course than the text itself.

To use a product-oriented text in a process-oriented course requires effort, if not experience, skill, and a fair knowledge of contemporary rhetorical theory and research. But who teaches

freshman composition? Of the ten programs housed in the English department and surveyed in Options for the Teaching of English: Freshman Composition (Jasper Neel, ed. New York: MLA, 1978), eight are relatively typical of those offered at graduate degree-granting institutions. Over half of those institutions staff 90% or more of the freshman composition courses with graduate students (pp. 1, 25, 46, 52, 57). One university without a graduate program staffs 30% of its sections with part-time faculty (p.32); Witte's survey puts that figure even higher, at 40% (p. 94). Anyone who has been a TA knows the pull between teaching and doing one's own work; anyone who has taught part-time knows how a tenuous relationship to the department can affect teaching. Being a full-time faculty member however, doesn't necessarily mean being an effective composition teacher. A person at the rank of instructor can end up with 12 or even 15 hours of composition classes, classes that in 1982-83 averaged from 24 to 31 students per section (Art Young et al. "The 1982-83 Writing and Literature Survey: Courses and Programs," ADE Bulletin, 76 [1983], 56). And while some full or associate professors teach and teach well, some only go through the motions or are so product-oriented they make Miss Fidditch look good.

Compared to how some tenured faculty may teach writing, perhaps putting composition in the hands of TA's isn't such a bad idea. Today's TA knows a lot more about writing and the teaching of writing than the TA of twenty even ten years ago. Burhans' examination of a representative sample of recent college catalogues reveals that 29% of the universities he surveyed offer graduate courses in rhetoric, 11% in writing theory and research

(p. 648). But these figures are very conservative. Considering the time lag between the adoption of a course and its inclusion in the catalog and the possibility of similar courses being offered under special topics headings, it is reasonable to assume that most TA's have at least the opportunity to learn about the current state of composition theory. In fact, Graves and Solomon's 1980 study shows that 73% of a representative sample of universities "have recently inaugurated at least one new graduate course in rhetoric and composition" ("New Graduate Courses in Rhetoric and Composition: A National Survey," FEN, 9 [Spring, 1980], 1). Witte's survey indicates that 71% mandate a course in the teaching of writing (p. 90).

Meanwhile, faculty members from all ranks are swelling the programs and sessions at NCTE and 4C's meetings, and journals concerned with writing and the teaching of writing are cropping up with some regularity. Of the fifteen journals cited in Gorrell's recent Bedford Bibliography (Robert M. Gorrell et al., Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1984), seven were started within the last ten years. In-service workshops abound. Witte's report shows 87% of the institutions surveyed held at least one workshop a year (p.89). More information is available than ten years ago, and more people are interested in knowing about it. The "knowledge gap" first noted by Lundsteen and then examined further by Burhans (CE, 45 [1983] 639-656) is not as wide as they claim it to be.

Just how wide it is is not easy to measure. Burhans' analysis of the goals and descriptions contained in college

catalogues leads him to conclude that between 83 and 89% of all writing courses fit the traditional model (p. 646). To define "traditional model," he uses Cooper and Odell's criteria, which have as their primary characteristic "emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process" (Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds. Research on Composing, Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978, p.31). Yet when I go to my own catalog and see all four freshman composition courses listed with the helpful description "An introductory course in writing, largely expository, accompanied by selected reading," I think I know where Burhan's would put our program. Yet in spite of the catalogue description, we have a sequence that rests on several process-oriented assumptions:

> (1) that writing is an act of communication in which the writer addresses a particular audience in order to achieve a specific purpose. (2) that students develop skill in writing by writing and revising; (3) that to write well, students need to practice writing in a variety of rhetorical modes and for a variety of purposes; (4) that reading and writing are integrally related skills (Handbook for the Freshman English Program. New Orleans: University of New Orleans' Department of English, [1983-84]. p. 2).

The catalogue emphasizes product; the program description stresses process.

Now Louisiana is hardly in the forefront of educational innovation--indeed the state now ranks 50th in basic literacy--yet UNO's freshman program is based on sound contemporary rhetorical principles, our TA's take at least one course in the

teaching of writing, over 75% of the faculty teaching composition write themselves, and a number of them are actively involved in rhetorical scholarship and research. At the most recent Conference on College Composition and Communication, for instance, six faculty members served on panels. In fact, this fall's ninety freshman composition teachers know and subscribe to and practice the writing process even though a number are allergic to its terminology. At the same time, we confront what every open admission institution faces: the dilemma of teaching writing vs. testing it; teaching the process, but needing to insure the product.

At the University of New Orleans, the emphasis on product takes the form of a proficiency test that is also an exit test for the second semester composition course. Transfer students have to pass a similar essay test in order to graduate. A recent survey of randomly selected colleges and universities shows that we are not alone: 34% test to measure proficiency, and of those that do, 78% set the end of the freshman year as the time to test competency; 80% require an essay, and of those that do, 89% score it holistically. For 70% of the departments surveyed, the responsibility for setting the standards and assuring their reliable application rests with the English department (Rosentene B. Purnell, "A Survey of the Testing of Writing Proficiency in College: A Progess Report," CCC, 38 [1982], 408-9). At UNO, the department faculty decided what to test and how and when. We also devised procedures for challenging the results of the examination, either by appealing a perceived inaccurate reading

of a paper or an uncharacteristic performance of the student.

At best, to teach to our test is to teach audience, voice, logical development, and analytical reading--to stress invention, arrangement, and style. At worst, it is to teach formulas that at a hasty reading may pass for thought: the shape of a paragraph without its texture, the name of a transition without its function, the statement of an assertion without its argumentative edge. And so, like many departments, we meet often (occasionally reinventing the wheel), discuss, argue, rehash, and try, through debate and by consensus, to find a middle ground between product and process. Ten years ago, we would not have noticed a problem.

Our bind over the test is tied to a larger one: as a department, we bear the brunt of our state-mandated open admission policy, a policy over which we have no control. This problem of responsibility without authority is one that Stephen Witte and Lester Faigley discuss in their study, Evaluating College Writing Programs (Carbondale and Edwardsvill, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983). There, they point out five components that underlie the evaluation of writing programs: (1) cultural and social context, (2) institutional context, (3) program structure and administration, (4) curriculum, and (5) instruction (p. 40). How and what we teach and the structure and administration of the writing program, which facilitates how and what we teach, are the usual elements one thinks of in describing a composition program; they concern matters such as the ones just discussed -- texts, staff, and course goals. But the progam's institutional context and cultural and social context are not as

obvious, yet they are significant.

To greater or lesser degrees, teachers of writing control what goes on in their classrooms. After all, when the bell rings and the door closes, when they are there alone with students and as long as they are reasonably responsible, they can teach however they like. They create assignments, show students how to go about responding to them, present models, read papers. They emphasize product or process or more likely struggle toward some compromise. But think of all that affects those classrooms that lies within what Witte and Faigley characterize as the institutional context, a context over which we have no control: the size of the class, its physical environment, the attitude of the tenured faculty toward the teaching of writing, the college or university's tenure and promotion policies, its merit raise structure, its salary levels. Like virtue, effective teaching of freshman composition may be its own reward, but it doesn't boost the ego for long and it won't pay for the groceries.

Think too of the wider context, the larger cultural and social forces that affect teachers of writing. Teachers have no control over their students' initial attitudes toward writing nor over a society that demands "back to basics" and thinks basics mean spelling and punctuation. We live in a society that values literacy yet underfunds education, that values "great books" but buys <u>People</u> magazine. Large sections, a disdain for the teaching of writing, little if any reward for a job well done, little if any appreciation of the power of the written word--these are forces that may keep teachers from searching for more effective

ways of teaching writing, whether the emphasis be product or process.

Yet the future is not what it used to be. Twenty years ago, teachers taught writing, as Burhans points out, based on myth; "informed by little theory and less research," they accepted uncritically the traditional method of teaching writing (p. 650). Now they are part of an emerging discipline, "intellectually vigorous, rich in scholarship, and various in its processes, functions, and uses" (p. 656), and as a discipline, it "in at least a few schools seems to be moving towards the kind of serious and professional concern usually accorded only to language and literature" (p. 650). And therein lies a danger. As the discipline develops, if writing cannot be accommodated within the traditional structure of the English department, if teachers of writing cannot qualify for the same rewards as their colleagues in literature and linguistics, then writing teachers will be tempted to defect. Already some 10% of the institutions in Burhans' study do not list departments of English but instead have departments of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Language Arts, Communication, Literature, or Writing (p. 656).

Numbers mean power. For all types of institutions, writing courses represent an average of 62% of instructional effort, with literature showing only 30% (Young et al., 56). Yet the great majority of the writing courses are at the lower end of the curriculum (69% for Ph. D. institutions; 68% at four-year, [Young et al., 57]), which means freshman composition. But if this element of the curriculum is seen as mere service, an unpleasant and unwanted duty, then the English department is on its way to

suicide. Hazard Adams, in a recent ADE article ("How Departments Commit Suicide," ADE Bulletin, 76, [1983]) notes the signs:

> (a) denigration and/or trivialization, often subtle, of the department's so-called service role, (b) relegation of some department programs to the periphery, (c) failure to give leadership (as a large department should) in the development of general education, (d) refusal to embrace new aspects of intellectual life that might well become or in part become the province of English, and (e) refusal to lead in areas where interdepartmental cooperation makes more sense than provinciality or aggressive colonizing (p. 9).

Adams' last few points are worth examining from the perspective of writing teachers, for as technology develops, their leadership, willingness to embrace new ideas, and cooperation with colleagues in other fields become increasingly important.

As the industrial revolution continues to evolve, we find ourselves moving from a labor-intensive economy to one in which our "'dominant national commodity . . . [is] based on the transfer of information'" (Max Schulz and Michael Holzman quoting The Chronicle of Higher Education, 6 April 1981, p. 8, in their article "English Departments--Writing Programs: Marraige or Divorce?" ADE Bulletin, 70 [1981], 27). Literacy then becomes a virtue, and the writer, the "Czar of Words" (Jack Shuttleworth, "Strategies and Tactics: The Czar of Words in the Eighties," ADE Bulletin, 72 [1982], 39-43). Information technology means computers, and computers offer not just methods of electronic

drill, but tutoring programs that can save time and energy. And as word processors, they offer what the printed page cannot: a means of expression far closer to the actual writing process than that of linear hand-writing or typing. Far from freezing or replacing the teaching of writing, computers more likely will foster it. Word-processing, as Francis A. Hubbard's recent review points out, "may make qualitative changes in how we compose as well as revise" ("Reviews," CE, 46 [1984], 131).

Meanwhile, the present isn't what it used to be. Textbooks are slowly incorporating the process of writing, graduate schools are emphasizing it in their courses, and freshman programs are being staffed by more informed teachers who in turn influence the program itself. Rhetoric and composition has become a hot field, as a glance at the Chronicle ads or the MLA Job List will attest. Given higher education's natural resistance to change, considering the attitudes of some tribal elders of literature, knowing the financial pressure for slave-labor staffing and large sections, weighing too the need for proficiency testing and the cultural climate of "back to basics," we should be surprised that process even exists in the large composition program, much less that it is wrestling with product for the predominant place in the classroom. To have come so far against such odds in so short a time is remarkable.

To guage how far that might be within any given department, I have made up an unscientific questionnaire that takes into account some significant issues related to a program's institutional context. The result is as much an index to a composition program's place within a department as it is a guide

to product and process. A score above 72 suggests that the department values the writing of language together with linguistics, the analysis of language, and literature, the study of its best expression.

A Quick & Dirty Guide to Product and Process
or
How to Determine What's Up in Your Department

Directions: Each statement should be rated on a scale of 1="No, Not at All" to 5="Yes, Definitely"

	1 2 3 4 5
	!...!...!...!...!
Textbooks	
1. chosen by staff	___
2. cover process of writing	___
3. used as resources	___
Staff	
4. hired with teaching experience	___
5. attends department workshops	___
6. writes	___
7. participates in NCTE, 4C's	___
8. participates in shaping writing program policy	___
Director of Composition Program	
9. is knowledgeable about rhetoric and composition	___
10. attends/participates in NCTE, 4C's, WPA	___
11. has voice in hiring, retention	___
12. sits in on classes	___
13. shows concern over class size	___
14. allows experimentation	___
Department Policy:	
15. requires revision	___
16. requires variety in audience	___
17. requires variety in purpose	___
18. states rhetorical assumptions of writing program	___
19. requires teaching of writing course for TA's	___
20. requires that all ranks teach composition	___
21. treats part-timers with parity	___
22. rewards good teaching of writing	___
23. recognizes teaching of writing for promotion and tenure	___
24. recognizes publication in writing journals	___
25. allows periodic review of department policies	___
26. enlists faculty response in review	___

Add all the scores. Total ___

Does your department require a test of students' proficiency? If so, subtract 20 from the total above. If not, add 20.

Grand Total ___

If the final score is above 72, the program probably emphasizes process, if below, product.